

FOR THOU ART WITH ME

Thanks to the faithful care of Dusty and Dinty, I was now well on my way to recovery. True, I still suffered from malaria and dysentery, and my legs were weak and shaky, but I could get around with the aid of my staff. Compared with my condition in the Death House, I was the picture of health.

With my physical strength returning and with time to think things over, I decided I was too much of a spectator. I was allowing others to minister to me, and taking no part in the life around me.

I asked myself the question: Why was I on the fence? Perhaps it was because of my disappointment in being captured almost at the end of a well-planned attempt to escape. Perhaps it was my resentment at wasting the good years of my youth in prison camp when I might have been playing an active part in the world struggle. Perhaps these and other things had made me bitter. But Dusty's and Dinty's example, and the self-sacrificing heroism of Angus, the Argyll, and the Aussie had humbled me.

In this mood I saw I had to take my place with whatever was good, and begin to give what I had to offer, however small it might be. Having conquered the diseases of my body, I was determined, with God's help, to overcome the frailties of my spirit, as men were doing around me daily. Although not entirely conscious of it at the time, I was responding to the power of renewal in our midst. This was indeed a miracle, for

we were without medicines; and we were devoid of the props of society that make for hope.

Were others feeling as I was? Were they, too, becoming aware that there is more to life than bread and bacon, pounds and dollars, Cadillacs and Rolls-Royces? Were we all coming out of the figurative Death House that our lives had become – out of the spiritual pit where fear, selfishness, hatred and despair are dominant?

Then Reason reasserted itself. The facts hardly warranted such an assumption. There was still nearly as much sickness as ever; men were still dying daily. 'Aren't you allowing your imagination to run away with you?' Reason whispered. 'Isn't part of the cure the wish to be cured?'

'Maybe so,' I had to admit. 'Maybe it's only that I'm getting used to my diseases and the environment. Or it may be simply that my glands are functioning a bit better.'

Then I heard the other voice.

'Perhaps all this is true. But there may be more to it than that. There may *be* a power beyond that of nature and man. Haven't you seen it for yourself – at work in Dusty and Dinty? Haven't you heard the evidence in the sacrifices of others? Possibly there is another form of healing – one that comes from the Most High.'

While I was still debating thus, an Australian sergeant dropped in one evening. We had never met before. He had a plan in mind, but it was a long time before I could get it out of him. He had been talking things over with his cobbers. Most of them, he told me, had called themselves Christians. But they had been so shaken by their experiences that they were wondering if there might not be something in Christianity after all that they had failed to understand. Now they wanted to give it another whirl. The sergeant was emphatic about one thing. His lads wouldn't stand for any 'Sunday School stuff'. They wanted 'the real dingo'.

‘What’s all this got to do with me?’ I asked.

He came to the point.

‘They’d like you to meet with them and – well – sort of lead the discussion.’

I was flabbergasted. I’d never done anything like this before.

‘Surely there must be others better qualified. Why come to me?’

He shook his head with slow stubbornness.

‘My cobbers think you’re right for the job. They know you’re a fighting soldier. Also, you’ve been to university.’

I wanted to reply, ‘No, I couldn’t possibly do it.’ But I did not say so. Instead we kept on talking. The more we talked the more I felt drawn to my visitor. He was short, but broad and muscular. A boyhood spent in the copper mines of New South Wales had accustomed him to hardship and danger. Although he had no educational advantages, he was endowed with intelligence and a sturdy spirit. I was still hesitating when he happened to mention that it was he who had organized the first team of masseurs to help the paralysed. He was giving to others; did I have the right to refuse his request? Furthermore, the concern of his men must be great, I reasoned, or they would not have commissioned him to approach me.

‘And if I do come,’ I said, ‘what good do you think it will do?’

The sergeant looked at me with intent brown eyes.

‘It’s as I said,’ he persisted. ‘Perhaps we haven’t understood Christianity rightly in the past. Now we have to find out if it’s absolute “dingo” or not.’

‘What if it turns out that Christianity isn’t “dingo”?’

He scratched his chin and looked me in the eye.

‘Then we’ll bloomin’-well know it ain’t. That could be important, too. My cobbers and I have given this a lot of thought. We feel we’ve seen the absolute worst there is – right? Now we believe there’s got to be something better.’

He frowned with distaste.

'You know, we got fed up with it; men kicking their cobbles in the teeth when they're down; stealing from the dying; crawling like rats to the Japs. No, sir! No matter how you look at it, it ain't good . . . It's rotten – rotten – rotten!'

'All right,' I said. 'I'll give it a try. But, mark you, I haven't the foggiest idea that whatever I can say will be of any use to you.'

'Oh, thank you!' He got up from his squatting position on the ground and held out his hand.

'Where would you like to meet?' I asked.

'You know that clump of bamboos just beyond the hospital?'

'Yes.'

'They're just above the "lats." We'll have more privacy there.'

'Isn't that down by the Death House?'

'Yes, why?'

I laughed. 'It's all part of my past. When do we meet?'

'Would tomorrow evening be too soon?'

'Not at all. I'll be there.'

After he left, I took stock of my meagre assets. One thing I knew for certain: in a situation as real as a prison camp it was no use discussing abstract philosophical concepts. Yet I could find little in my pre-war experience that promised to be meaningful. I'd had the usual youthful idealistic enthusiasms. David Livingstone had been one of my childhood heroes. Albert Schweitzer's life and work had been an inspiration to me, and at one time I had considered becoming a foreign missionary. But gradually I turned my back on such ideals and, in doing so, on Christianity as well. Its doctrines and practices seemed irrelevant and other-worldly compared with those of my rationalist friends.

The only two expressions of Christian doctrine I had encountered had left me unimpressed. The first maintained that the Bible had been literally inspired, had been dictated word for word and handed to man on a silver platter, as it were. The

Christian life was conceived as one of obedience to a set of arbitrary laws which seemed to be negative, restrictive and frustrating. They required one to abjure the world and its sins, to spend time in verbal prayer, to commit oneself to Bible study of a very literal kind, and to regard every disaster as a consequence of sin. The main theological emphasis was placed upon the death of Jesus Christ as a sacrifice made to appease a wrathful God.

What I found particularly hard to accept was the attitude of such Christians towards others outside their sectarian group. With the vehemence of basic uncertainty they regarded themselves as God's anointed and were therefore critical of everyone else. As far as I could see, they managed to extract the bubbles from the champagne of life, leaving it insipid, flat and tasteless. I liked the world and life. I liked good companionship and laughter. Any creed that necessitated not going to the theatre, not drinking, not smoking and not kissing the girls seemed not only monotonously dull but an incredibly easy way of getting to heaven. I infinitely preferred a robust hell to this grey, sunless abode of the faithful where everybody was angry with everybody else.

The other doctrinal expression seemed to hold that Christianity was only for nice people who had been brought up in nice homes and gone to nice schools where they had learned to do all the nice things. Heaven for this group was a kind of perpetual tea-party with thin cucumber sandwiches and smoky-tasting tea served in fine bone-china cups. It was all eminently respectable but rather hard on those outside the pale.

None of that appealed to me. Politics or social service – something of that sort – offered a surer and more realistic way to help solve the problems of mankind. Then there were the sciences. The rapid progress being made in that sphere indicated that man could take care of himself and unravel his own

dilemma without help from a divine power, no matter how benign. Of such was the real world in which man had been placed by the evolutionary process, as the one creature conscious of what was going on. As he floated down the stream of history, he could know that the current would ultimately land him in Utopia.

Many brave worlds were being projected in those days, and mine was one of them. We had no idea how soon they would prove to be mirages.

As I thought over what I was going to say to the men, I realized that I had the advantage of starting with a clean slate. Like them, the thing for me to do was to find out as much as I could about Jesus.

Once, when I was a student, I had gone to a lecture advertised as the first of a series dealing with the person and teaching of Jesus. The series began with the Book of Leviticus in the Old Testament. It was not clear to me how anyone could learn much about Jesus from the variety of sacrifices reported there in abundance, so I never went to another lecture. From experiences such as these, I had reached the conclusion that Jesus Christ was a figure in a kind of fairy story, suitable for children perhaps, but not for men.

The logical place for me to begin now, I reflected, was with the New Testament, as the only record we have of his life and teaching. I had a Bible, an old one that had been given to me by a kindly other rank, who wished to lighten his pack as he set out for a trip farther up-country. It was well thumbed, torn and patched, with covers made from the oilskin of a gas cape. There were no references, explanations or annotations.

That Bible was all I had to draw on when I faced the group next evening in the bamboo grove. I was not a little dismayed to see that there were several dozen of them. They were waiting for me in respectful silence. But their faces said plainly, 'We'll tolerate you, chum, so long as you don't try any

waffling.' ('Waffling' being the gentle art of evading the issue, or making a half-lie take the place of the whole truth.)

I began by describing my own uncertain state of grace, telling them frankly of my doubts and conflicts. When I asked them straight out if they were willing to go along with me and face up to the basic issues of existence, they said that they were. At first I felt my way cautiously. I told them something of what I had learned in school of Greek and Roman culture, of polytheism and Mithraism, of the life in Old Testament times. It did not take long to run through my superficial erudition. Silence fell; an uncomfortable silence. In desperation I asked for questions.

It was a risky thing to do. They might have ruined me, by driving me into a corner or forcing me into a contest of words in which I'd be the loser. But that wasn't why they were there. They wanted to find meaning in life, if meaning was there to be found.

They were very considerate — those cobbers. When they began to talk, they spoke freely of their own inner disturbances. They gave their honest views about life on earth, its object and the life hereafter. They were seeking a truth they would be able to apprehend with the heart as well as with mind. When the meeting ended, I knew I would be able to go on with them.

At each successive meeting the numbers grew. There were new faces, more pairs of eyes to look questioningly into mine. I kept one lesson ahead of them, as I expounded the New Testament in their own language.

Through our readings and discussions we gradually came to know Jesus. He was one of us. He would understand our problems, because they were the kind of problems he had faced himself. Like us, he often had no place to lay his head, no food for his belly, no friends in high places. He, too, had known bone-weariness from too much toil; the suffering, the

rejection, the disappointments that make up the fabric of life. Yet he was no kill-joy. He would not have scorned the man who took a glass of wine with his friends, or a mug of McEwan's ale, or who smiled approvingly at a pretty girl. The friends he had were like our own and like us.

As we read and talked, he became flesh and blood. Here was a working-man, yet one who was perfectly free, who had not been enslaved by society, economics, law, politics or religion. Demonic forces had existed then as now. They had sought to destroy him but they had not succeeded.

True, he had been suspended on a cross and tormented with the hell of pain; but he had not been broken. The weight of law and of prejudice had borne down on him, but failed to crush him. He had remained free and alive, as the Resurrection affirmed. What he was, what he did, what he said, all made sense to us. We understood that the love expressed so supremely in Jesus was God's love – the same love that we were experiencing for ourselves – the love that is passionate kindness, other-centred rather than self-centred, greater than all the laws of men. It was the love that inspired St Paul, once he had felt its power, to write, 'Love suffereth long and is kind'.

The doctrines we worked out were meaningful to us. We approached God through Jesus the carpenter of Nazareth, the incarnate Word. Such an approach seemed logical, for that was the way he had come to us. He had taken flesh, walked in the midst of men and declared himself by his actions to be full of grace and truth.

We arrived at our understanding of God's ways not one by one, but together. In the fellowship of freedom and love we found truth, and with truth a wonderful sense of unity, of harmony, of peace.

I had need of all the grace and understanding I could acquire. For I had now volunteered for work on the Australian sergeant's massage team, and almost daily I was confronted by

questions from the men we served that Reason alone could not answer. The massage team was doing useful work, as so many men were paralysed from the waist down, and in consequence suffered from terrible depression, fearing that they would never walk again. Our job was to try to get circulation started again in the wasted limbs.

Each of us was assigned four or five patients to care for, scattered in different huts throughout the camp. We visited our charges daily. As we massaged we listened to their woes and worries. When the opportunity came, we talked to them, seeking to impart assurance and to encourage their will to live.

Nearly all of our patients were young. Some of them were dying. I had reason then to be thankful for the eternal truths we had found during our meetings in the bamboo grove, for again and again my charges brought me face to face with the great basic problems of human experience. Nearly all of their queries were concealed forms of the Big One; 'How do I face death? Can death be overcome?'

Reason had no more to say on this subject than 'There's nothing to life beyond the fact that we are born, we suffer and we die.' Most of us were accustomed to such an answer, for it had been stamped indelibly on our subconscious minds by the many conditioning processes of the twentieth century. This may have sufficed for normal living, but for men dying away from home in a jungle prison camp it was not enough.

When an acceptable answer was demanded of me, I had to go beyond Reason – I had to go to Faith. If I had learned to trust Jesus at all, I had to trust him here. Reason said, 'We live to die.' Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life.'

In the light of our new understanding, the Crucifixion was seen as being completely relevant to our situation. A God who remained indifferent to the suffering of His creatures was not a God whom we could accept. The Crucifixion, however, told us that God was in our midst, suffering with us. We did not know

the full answer to the mystery of suffering, but we could see that so much of it was caused by 'man's inhumanity to man', by selfishness, by greed and by all the forces of death that we readily support in the normal course of life. The cry of the innocent child, the agony I had seen in the eyes of a Chinese mother as she carried her dead baby, the suffering caused by earthquakes, fires or floods, we could not explain. But we could see that God was not indifferent to such pain.

We stopped complaining about our own plight. Faith would not save us from it, but it would take us through it. Suffering no longer locked us up in the prison house of our self-pity but brought us into what Albert Schweitzer called the 'fellowship of those who bear the mark of pain'.

I was walking back to my hut one evening when a medical orderly stopped me.

'Excuse me, sir,' he said. 'There's an Argyll in my ward who'd like to see you. He came in a couple of days ago with a sick party from up-country. He's a young lad.'

'Does he need massage?'

'No. There's nothing we can do. He's dying. He has gangrene. It's all up with him.'

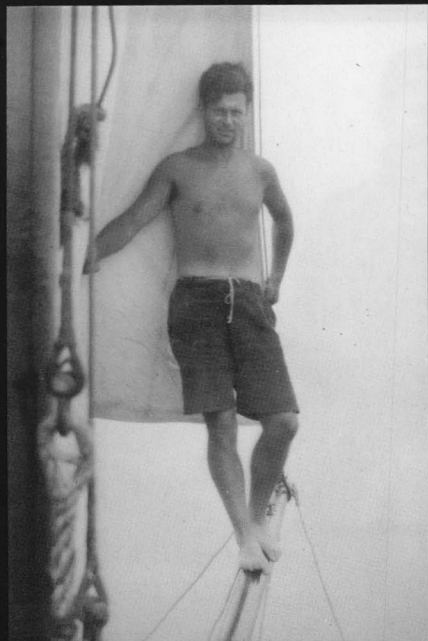
'What would you like me to do, then?'

'He's so miserable, I thought perhaps you could comfort him a bit. In any case, he'll be glad to see another Argyll.'

'Take me to him,' I said.

The long hut to which the orderly led me was crowded with new arrivals. We made our way down the row of sleeping platforms astir with the restless movements of suffering men. The orderly must have seen dozens of youngsters die. Yet this boy seemed to have touched him. About the centre of the hut, he stopped before a motionless figure. My heart constricted. The dim light accentuated the boy's youth and his loneliness.

'Here he is, lad,' said the orderly softly. 'I've brought him to you.'



Growing up along the Clyde estuary, Ernest Gordon sailed from his earliest years. He became known as a skilled helmsman and strategist in international yacht races on the Firth of Clyde. He was on the crew of the British Olympic six-metre racing team, but they were never able to compete because of the war. He raced frequently at the Singapore Royal Yacht Club before the fall of Singapore.



On the Firth of Clyde near Dunoon, Scotland, circa 1937.

Before World War II in an argyll uniform, 1938.




Ernest Gordon's Royal Air Force pilot's license. He joined the RAF in 1936 and survived a plane crash near London in 1937.

(A) NOT VALID FOR FLYING PUBLIC TRANSPORT

LICENCE 1.

LICENCE.

MINISTRY

Photograph  of Holder.

Signature of Holder..... *E. Gordon*

This Pilot's Licence for private flying machines

No. 11002..... dated

14th November 1936..... has been issued to

E. Gordon.....

who is hereby licensed to fly the following types


of flying machines:— All types of

landplanes. *(B)* see page 4

This licence is valid..... day

Given at..... London..... this..... 14th..... day

of..... November..... 19 36.

 *J. B. Wright*
Deputy Director of Civil Aviation



Portrait of Captain Ernest Gordon in his Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders uniform, 1941. Photograph taken in Singapore.



Ernest (middle) enjoys a relaxed moment with a group of fellow Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders.



Captain Ernest Gordon leading troops down to a beach in Port Dickson, Malaya, in 1941 before the fall of Singapore.



Ernest (centre) with two British officers circa 1940 in Port Said, Egypt, while on their way to Singapore.



Captain Ernest Gordon carrying G.O.C. Arthur Percival to a boat in Endau-Rompin, Malaya, August 1941. In February 1942, General Percival surrendered his soldiers to the Japanese in Britain's most humiliating defeat of the war.

The infamous 'Death Railway' extended approximately 250 miles cutting through what has been called the most inhospitable terrain in the world. It was finished in less than twelve months.



IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY

Date 15th JAN. 1944.

Your mails ~~and~~ are received with thanks.
 My health is (good, usual, poor).
~~I am ill in hospital.~~
~~I am working for pay (I am paid monthly salary).~~
 I am not working.
 My best regards to MOTHER, SALLY, AUNTS, MRS. ARCHIE
 NICOLSON, THE CHURCH AND ALL MY FRIENDS.

Yours ever,

Ernest

Above: Postcard dated 15 January 1944 sent to Ernest's father, James Gordon. This postcard was the only kind of correspondence allowed by the Japanese, and the information was false — Ernest was not in good health, nor was he paid a 'monthly salary' for the slave labour he was forced to perform.

Below: Sketch by Ronald Searle dated 15 September 1943. The living skeletons depicted in this drawing were victims of cholera. They were British POWs held in Tarso, Thailand, one of the camps along the Death Railway. (Courtesy Ronald

Searle Estate)





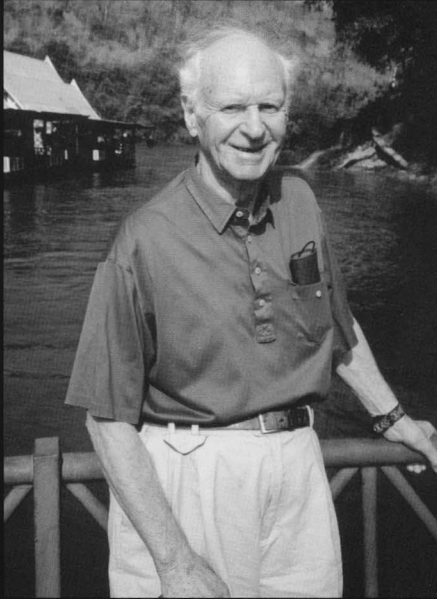
Allied War Cemetery at Chungkai, Thailand.



Going home after the war, 1945. Ernest Gordon (far left), en route from Rangoon to Liverpool on board the MS Boisserain with other former POWs.



Ernest Gordon (seated) greeting Nagase Takashi, a former officer in the Japanese army. On 4 February 2000, they met in a ceremony of reconciliation on the banks of the Kwai River beside the infamous bridge.



Ernest Gordon returns to the River Kwai, Thailand, in February 2000. He is standing at a spot on the river near Tarsau, a former POW camp.



Ernest Gordon takes a moment to reflect while sitting in the shade of a cave in Wampo, Thailand. He is looking out over a section of viaduct on the Railway of Death where many of his comrades died. (February 2000)

Large, frightened grey eyes stared up at me from an emaciated face. As I bent closer, he seemed to recognize me.

'Oh, I'm glad to see you, sir.'

He managed to sit up.

'I'm glad to see *you*,' I replied.

'You probably don't know me,' he said. 'I arrived with the last draft. I've seen you often, but you probably haven't seen me.'

I remembered the last draft only too well. Those who had been sent to us were boys of eighteen, with but half a year's training, and with school or apprenticeship only months behind. They were plunged into the bloodiest of actions, and the survivors experienced the worst kind of imprisonment.

The boy began to speak rapidly, as though a great weight had been lifted from him.

'I've been so lonely. I don't know anyone here. It's been a long time since I've seen an Argyll.'

'You're looking at one now,' I said, smiling. 'And there are others. You'll find friends here.'

I sat down on the narrow edge of his sleeping platform.

'It's been hard for you, hasn't it?'

'Awfully hard,' he nodded without self-consciousness. 'I've become terribly depressed, because I'm scared – I suppose. I'm so scared at times that I can't think.'

'What are you scared of?'

'All kinds of things – scared about the Nips – and scared that I'm going to die.'

What could I say? I knew that he hadn't a chance, because of the advanced nature of his gangrene. I looked at him, lying there so lonely and so young, and said the only thing I could think of: 'We'll help you not to be scared. We'll stay by you.'

This seemed to ease his mind.

'Thank you sir,' he said. 'That's good to know.'

He gave me an engaging boyish smile. I got up.

‘Go to sleep now. I’ll look in on you tomorrow.’

I did what I could for him, but it hurt because it was so little. I passed the word on to Dusty and Dinty; they went to see him often, and encouraged their friends to do so, too. Soon the lad had a chain of regular visitors, so that he did not spend too many hours alone.

I had been able to lay hands on some delicacies for him – a duck egg and half a hand of bananas – I went to take these to him.

‘How are things tonight?’ I asked.

I was delighted at the change in his manner. He seemed relaxed and almost cheerful.

‘Not too bad,’ he said, sitting up. ‘You’ve no idea what a help it is to have friends. I don’t feel lonely any more. And I’m not scared.’

He smiled up at me trustingly. Then, very softly, he said, ‘I’m going to die, aren’t I?’

I cleared my throat, searching for words. ‘That’s a possibility we all have to face. I’ve faced it – so have a lot of others.’

‘I know,’ the boy nodded. ‘That’s why I like to talk to you. You’ve been through it. You understand.’

I did not answer. I was thinking to myself, ‘Do I? Do I? Can I ever understand even a little of what goes on in another’s mind and heart?’

His tremulous smile was fading. A frown of worry wrinkled his forehead as he looked at me.

‘My mother and dad will miss me. I’m the only one they’ve got and they’ll be so lonely when I don’t come back.’ He sighed. ‘It’s tough to be young and have to die. I don’t even know what this war is all about.’

‘Here, let me read you something that may help.’ I spoke the words evenly, pretending to be more in control of my emotions than I actually was.

I had brought my Bible with me. I opened its torn pages and

in the dim light of the hut I began to read those words that had comforted countless souls before him: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

I looked over at him. He was lying quietly. I turned to another passage: "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?"

I put the Bible down. His grey eyes were far away and he was listening within himself – to the message those words had brought. After a bit he turned his gaze to mine and said with perfect calm, 'Everything is going to be all right.'

'Yes,' I nodded. 'Everything is going to be all right.'

He slumped back. His efforts had exhausted him. I knelt beside his sleeping-platform and gently stroked his forehead with my fingers until he fell into a deep, untroubled sleep.

Two evenings later, as I was on my way to visit him again, I saw the orderly running towards me.

'Come quickly!' he cried. 'He hasn't long to go.'

Together we ran. The boy was lying without moving.

'Hello, son,' I said. At the sound of my voice he turned his head towards me.

'Hello, sir. I'm glad you're here.'

I knelt beside him and took his pathetically thin hand in mine. A yellow glow lighted the darkness behind me. The thoughtful orderly had produced a coconut-oil lamp.

'Light,' said the boy in a low voice. 'It's good to have light. I don't like the dark.'

The flickering flame rose and fell, then burned steadily, holding the shadows at bay.

'It's all right. I'm glad it's all right,' he whispered. There was a look of trust and hope on his face as he said this.

'Yes, son, it's all right,' I assured him. 'God our Father is with us. He is very near.'

'I know He is.' The sigh the boy gave was not sad, but confident.

Still holding his hand, I prayed, "Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name . . ."

His eyes were closed. But as I watched his face I could see his lips repeating the words with me: "... Thy kingdom come . . ."

The flame of the lamp spluttered, almost went out, then seemed to burn more brightly.

"... Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven . . ."

His lips no longer moved. His breath started coming in great sobbing gasps. They ceased. He was quiet – with the quietness of death.

'Father,' I prayed, 'receive this dear child. Welcome him with thy love for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, thy Son. Amen.'

I put down his hand by his side, smoothed his hair and wiped from his forehead one of my tears.

His was not an isolated case. All those lads who stood faltering at death's doorway felt keenly the tragedy of dying young.

At this time, some verses came into my possession. They were written by one of them, an unknown English youth, in Singapore. His lines express what many others also felt:

*What shall I think when I am called to die?
Shall I not find too soon my life has ended?
The years, too quickly, have hastened by
With so little done of all that I'd intended.*

*There were so many things I'd meant to try,
So many contests I had hoped to win;
And, lo, the end approaches just as I
Was thinking of preparing to begin.*

It was experiences such as these that made our discussions meaningful. We were developing a keener insight into life and its complexities. We were learning what it means to be alive – to be human. As we became more aware of our responsibility to God the Father, we realized that we were put into this world not to be served but to serve. This truth touched and influenced many of us to some degree – even some of those who shunned any religious quest. Men began to smile – even to laugh – and to sing.

I was hobbling back to my shack after a rather late discussion session. Passing one of the huts I stopped. There was a sound of men singing. As I listened, I recognized 'Jerusalem the Golden'. Someone was beating time on a piece of tin with a stick. The words of the old hymn seemed symbolic to me as they rose in the still night. Maybe Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God, is here after all, 'with milk and honey blest'. Maybe man shall 'not live by bread alone'. Maybe there is the milk and honey of the spirit that puts hope into a man's eyes and a song on his lips.

They went on as I stood there, singing the hymn once more. The song made the darkness seem almost friendly. In the difference between this joyful sound and the joyless stillness of months past was the difference between life and death. This hymn had the sound of victory. To me it said, 'Man need never be so defeated that he cannot do anything. Weak, sick, broken in body, far from home, and alone in a strange land, he can sing! He can worship!'

The resurgence of life increased. It grew and leavened much of the camp, expressing itself in men's increased concern for their neighbours.

For instance, the most forlorn and dispirited among the bedridden were the amputees. The loss of legs was common amongst us – the end result of tropical ulcers and the many diseases stemming from malnutrition. Amputation –

performed often with the crudest of instruments and without anaesthetic – was often a last resort to stop gangrene and save lives.

Through our work on the massage teams we were taking some preventive measures. But those who were beyond this form of help could only lie on their sleeping platforms, unable to move about.

In one of the huts a friendship developed between a cobbler and an engineer. The engineer had an inventive mind; the cobbler was adept with his hands. They took long walks together, animatedly discussing some project. Presently they were seen working with odd scraps of material.

One day they gathered their hut-mates and disclosed what they had been doing. They had produced an artificial leg. It was a workmanlike article; the foot was a block of wood secured to a bamboo leg by strips of iron from old cans and by pieces of leather. The leg supported a round basket of leather and canvas to hold the stump. It even boasted an ingenious tin joint which enabled the wearer to bend his knee when he sat down or to lock it into rigidity when he wished to walk.

The other POWs examined it with admiring curiosity. Quite a thing. Damn' good job they'd made of it. But of what practical value was one leg when hundreds were needed? The cobbler and the engineer then offered their proposal – they would teach the amputees to make other legs just like it. With Mark One off the drawing-board, it shouldn't prove too difficult to go into mass production. It was a matter only of finding the right materials.

Thus was born in Chungkai a new industry – run by the legless, for the legless. Volunteers caught the spirit and went out scrounging for any odds and ends that could be useful. Some brought hides from the slaughter-house; others, sections of bamboo or knapsacks to be cut up into strips. Some slipped out beyond the fence at night to bring back pods of yellow

silky kapok that grew wild in the jungle, for kapok was ideally suited to line the stump-supporting baskets.

When the amputees had mastered their new trade, they extended their production and made sandals for their mates who still had legs. These sandals were far from a perfect fit, but they filled their purpose of covering a man's foot, and of protecting it against cuts and bruises. Above all, they gave him a little dignity.

With mobility and work to fill the idle hours came new hope – not only for those who were able to move round the camp for the first time, but also for the many others who had been haunted by the fear that they too might lose their legs.

When I was passing the work area one evening I heard a *click-clack-thud-thud; click-clack-thud-thud*. I turned to see a cocky little man strutting proudly along on two artificial legs.

'That's quite a performance you're giving,' I said admiringly.

He grinned at me. 'You haven't seen nothing yet,' he replied. 'Keep your eye on me. When I get these pistons working properly, I'll be the fastest man in camp. The hundred yards in ten seconds – that's what I'll be doing.'

Click-clack-thud-thud; click-clack-thud-thud – it made a lively sound as he went off into the dusk.

This was the new spirit that was abroad. Along with our awakening there came a spontaneous hunger for education. Although men's bodies were frail and wasted, their minds were very much alive. To satisfy this hunger, a jungle university was established. Perhaps 'established' is too grand a word, for it was a university without lecture rooms, without colleges or halls, without examinations. Classes were held anywhere at any time.

An attempt had been made to start a similar university earlier in the history of Chungkai, but it had not prospered, being too limited in scope and intended chiefly for those who

were university students or intended to be. This time the base was broader; anyone who wanted to learn was welcome. The only qualification for admission to any class was a thirst for knowledge. Enquiring students sought out their masters among those who had had the benefit of special training and practically shanghaied them into serving as *magistri*. A group would gather around a teacher in a given subject and there they would have a seminar. As rapidly as students learned, they would put their knowledge at the service of fellow POWs by acting as leaders of other seminars. The taught became the teachers in a chain reaction.

The curriculum, for those circumstances, was amazingly varied. Courses were offered in history, philosophy, economics, mathematics, several of the natural sciences, and at least nine languages, including Latin, Greek, Russian and Sanskrit. The faculty was handicapped by a shortage of textbooks, but they were not deterred. They wrote their own, from memory, as they went along. Language instructors compiled their own grammars on odd scraps of paper.

A library was formed. It was a peripatetic library; it had no home, no lending system. Men made known the books they had and arranged by word of mouth to pass them on to others. As the library grew, the presence in camp of a surprising number of books was brought to light. The library of Raffles College in Singapore had been plundered by the Japanese, and a number of volumes from it had found their way to Changi and thence to Chungkai.

Men had clung to any books that fell into their hands – for practical reasons. They were useful for barter. The pages were prized for rolling cigarettes, for writing letters home, or for use as toilet paper. Now the situation was reversed. Books were again valued for the information they contained.

By the good graces of gifted teachers, I was able to resume the study of law I had begun in the Army. In addition I

combined the study of Greek and moral philosophy by reading Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in the original. I obtained these books through the generosity of an Oxford classicist, whose most treasured possessions they were.

Before long I found myself teaching what I was learning to two groups of my own. One group wanted to study elementary Greek; the other, subjects of ethical concern. I had no Greek grammar. By searching my own memory and that of friends, I was able to write out an elementary working grammar on paper scraps, which were passed from student to student. The Japanese at that period were taking pleasure in subjecting us during the day to prolonged roll-calls. My students made good use of the time by memorizing the conjugations of declensions they were in the process of learning.

My study group in ethics was no doubt typical of many other gatherings. It consisted of three Australians, two Englishmen and three Scots. All were as different as could be in background and in education. One had been a professional boxer, one a rancher, one a university student, one a laboratory technician, one a carpenter, one a high-school student, one an insurance clerk and one a teacher. But all were alike in their intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm.

In the warm tropical evenings, we met about three times a week either at the side of one of the huts or by one of the few bamboo clumps still left in the ever-expanding camp. Beginning with the *Republic* we discussed successive theories of the good that had shaped the minds of people in various societies. One in particular that provoked vehement argument was the theory of utilitarianism.

'Blimey,' said one of the Diggers, sitting cross-legged on the ground, 'if efficiency is the test of goodness then we'll end up by being part of a ruddy great machine. It's only machines that work efficiently.'

An Englishman said authoritatively, 'But if the state has to

ensure the greatest happiness of the greatest number then it has to be governed and administered with the maximum efficiency.'

'Oh, to hell with that!' the Digger retorted impatiently. 'That kind of efficiency means the blokes at the top telling the rest of us what we must do. Take our proper place in society and all that rot. No, I'm not for it. What's goin' to happen to the poor blokes who ain't in the greatest number? Tell me that!'

'They'll be educated, I suppose,' the Englishman said coolly, 'until they learn to respect the best interests of others.'

'Browbeaten, you mean!' said the Digger. 'The sods who write the textbooks will try to control our minds.'

'What would you expect in an ideal society, then?' I asked.

'My freedom,' the Digger shot back at me. 'My freedom to think me own thoughts and to live me own life the way I bloomin'-well fancy.'

'That would lead to anarchy,' said the Englishman quietly.

'And what's wrong with a healthy bit of anarchy, I'd like to know? I'm goin' to use some of it when I get back to tell ole Menzies what I think of him for gettin' us into this mess.'

'If everybody did that sort of thing where do you think it would get us?' enquired the Englishman.

'It might get some peace, that's what!' came the Australian's voice from the darkness. 'Trouble is, a bloke never has the chance to say what he wants. If all the blokes in the world were to tell the bosses in government that we weren't going to fight no ruddy more wars for them then we could stay at home and take the ole girl out swimmin' at Bondi Beach.'

There was general laughter and a murmuring of approval.

'That's what the League of Nations tried to do, wasn't it?' called out a voice with a friendly Glasgow accent.

'No, it bloody-well didn't, mate,' retorted the Australian promptly. 'Damn' few of the blokes in the world ever knew there was such a thing as the League of Nations. It was all for

them smooth-tongued bastards in spats and monkey-suits – that’s what it was for.’

‘Those chaps in spats,’ said the quiet English voice, ‘are our duly elected representatives.’

‘Not mine, they ain’t!’

I asked the Australian, ‘How would you run things? Let’s hear what you’ve got in mind.’

‘By not runnin’ them,’ he replied quickly. ‘There’s too many blockheads runnin’ things as it is. The way things are, the state controls us by force and says it does it for our own good. The difference between a tyranny and a democracy, as I see it, is one of degree – the degree of force that is used.’

‘But we’ve got to have force to preserve law and order,’ a new voice broke in.

‘No, we ain’t!’ said the Australian hotly. ‘We don’t have to live by force, see! We only think we do.’

‘What do you mean “think we do”?’ someone jeered.

‘Blimey, we’ve all been told that, ain’t we? That’s why we studied history at school. History was just one bloody war after another to prove that the simple blokes of the earth have to be kept under control by force.’

Explosive murmurs of protest interrupted him.

‘Now shut up and let me say my piece,’ he said in a loud voice, and then continued quickly: ‘What we blokes have to do when we get back, see, is to say, “We’ve had it. No more bleedin’ force. We ain’t interested in keepin’ on with the old ways.” What we want is for blokes to respect each other and work with each other.’

‘And how the hell do you think you’re going to do that?’ an irritated Scottish voice called out.

‘By doing it – just by doing it. We talk too much.’

A sharp burst of laughter greeted this remark.

‘All right – I’ll give you that,’ said the Digger, unperturbed. ‘Me too. I talk too much. We do too little, though. We talk

about democracy, freedom, brotherhood, equality and all those words, but we don't do them, see?'

I had to interrupt, 'Wind it up, Digger. "Lights out" is almost due.'

'OK. Well, what I've been tryin' to say is that it ain't the state we want to support, but a community.'

'What you want is communism!' a voice shouted out.

'No, it bloody-well ain't,' said the Australian indignantly. 'Communism just means being forced to do what the state wants and calling it equality. That's all it is . . . Let me finish! A community is people doing instead of yapping. It ain't saying we are equal – it's doing it so that it's real. It ain't shouting about truth – it's doing it. It ain't barking about peace – it's being peaceful. You get my drift?'

'Look at this here camp,' he continued. 'A regular police state it is – run by force. Cobbers like ourselves have been trying to follow the Nips' example. That's why we've been tearin' at each other's throats. If you ask me, we might get somewhere if we had a little respect for each other and learned to share what we have.'

'Impossible – totally impossible,' said the English voice authoritatively.

'Like hell it is. It's impossible only because you want it to be impossible. When a gang of blokes stand up and show what they mean by what they do – then you'll see changes being made.'

The call of a bugle cut him short.

'You'll see the blokes executed,' said the Englishman.

We broke up. As we walked away from the bamboo grove, the Australian's final words echoed in my ears: '. . . then you'll see changes being made.'

'Yes,' I thought to myself, 'we'll see changes being made. And when we see them we'll see the Kingdom of God.'

* * *

Arguments like these did not take place in a vacuum. When we returned to our huts we were confronted by an environment that was all too frighteningly real.

In our university no records were kept; no degrees were awarded. Our courses did much to relieve the awful monotony; but they did much more than that. They helped us to see that our minds could work only on what they received from education, from experience, above all from faith. It was faith, I felt, that enabled us to transcend our environment, to appropriate what was good and true in our education and tradition, and thus prepare us to make decisions on matters of ultimate consequence to us as human beings.

It seemed to me that the quest for meaning in life, the religious search and the hunger for knowledge all go hand in hand.

One evening after roll-call I had an unexpected visitor. It was a prisoner named Dodger Green, a fair, slight, waif-and-stray type of man who had served with me in the 93rd Highlanders. Life had not treated him kindly. He had spent his youth in an orphanage in the North of England, where he had sorely missed the happy rough-and-tumble of a normal home. I had always felt a certain air of sadness about him – something which he tried to disguise by carrying a chip on his shoulder. He was always a good soldier, though – better than he knew.

This night he struck me as being more melancholy than ever.

‘I’ve just arrived at this camp,’ he said. ‘I heard you were here, so I thought you wouldn’t mind if I came over and had a chat with you.’

He said this very shyly, with his face averted and looking at the ground.

‘Glad to see you,’ I said, shaking his hand. ‘How are things with you?’

He shook his head.

'Not so good. I had a pretty rough time up-country and had to be sent back. My prospects ain't bright.'

'What's wrong?'

He tapped a Dutch army canteen that he wore strapped above his right groin.

'My ruddy guts have sealed up and they end with a hole in my belly.'

'What caused that?'

'Ulcers of some kind, that's what it is. My guts cemented together. The docs tell me they've grown into each other in some queer way. I don't rightly understand how. The MO says there's nothing more to be done for me until we get out of these damn' awful prisons.'

He was such a picture of bleak misery that I tried to cheer him up.

'The sooner we all get out the better. It may not be too long now.'

He stared down at his feet.

'Maybe it *will* be too long for me – and others like me.'

'Come off it,' I said. 'You're past the worst. You've got to stick it out. You've friends who'll help you.'

Again he shook his head, as if to imply that someone like him could never expect to have friends.

'I'm not so sure about that.'

His long, hollow face with the high cheekbones made him look the last word in hopelessness.

'I'll stick by you,' I said. 'And so will others. We'll work out something together. Let me know if there's anything at all I can do.'

'Thank you,' he said. 'I don't think there is. But it was nice of you to say that.'

He raised his head, and held out his hand to bid me goodbye. He was going, and I had done nothing for him –

nothing to ease his path. I thought fast. How could I arouse some response in him?

'Have you anything to read?' I asked.

'No. I haven't had anything for a long time. I did have a detective story; but it was pinched from me – along with my mess kit.'

He brightened, and said, with his first trace of eagerness, 'Yes, now that you speak of it, I would like to read again.'

'I've a book I think you'd like. It's Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley*. I've just finished it and I'll be glad to lend it to you. It's a great book.'

Before giving it to him, I slipped a few bahts – all the money I had – between the pages. Then I wished him good night.

Next day he came back to see me. Holding out the baht notes, he said gruffly, 'You left some money in the book. Here it is.'

He looked so self-righteous standing there that I couldn't help laughing.

'Surely you don't think I'm so wealthy that I can afford to use baht notes for book-markers, do you? Even those that have been printed by the Japs?'

His shoulders lost their stiffness and the strain left his face.

'No, I suppose not. Did you mean for me to have them?'

'Of course I did. Take them – and buy yourself some eggs and bananas. I suppose you know by now that there's a canteen in the camp, run by the Japs and supplied by the Thais?'

Rather sheepishly he said, 'I've no money – that is, I haven't had until now.' He held out the money again. 'I can't believe you want me to have this.'

'That's exactly what I do want,' I said firmly. 'Sit down and give me your crack.'

He began to talk in a friendly fashion. The more he talked the more he seemed at home in my little shack. He was sitting beside me now with his two hands round his left knee, pressing it close to his chest. After a time, he said, 'You know, I haven't had

much of an education, but I get to thinking about things every now and then. I've never been able to talk to anyone about them before. I'd like to. Do you mind if I come to you?'

It had been an effort for him to make this request. He had a wistful yet hopeful look.

'Certainly not,' I replied, thankful he asked me. 'I'll be delighted to discuss things with you. We'll begin with the book you're reading and go on from there.'

We had many talks after that. First, we discussed literature in general; we spoke of authors and what they were trying to say; the symbols they used to convey deeper meanings; and the subjective quality that made reading not only entertaining but intellectually enlivening.

We went on to talk about history and the people who made history. Gradually we came to men and women and their actions. What made them the way they were? Why did they act as they did? What was unique about man? Such discussions took us naturally into the realm of religion. Dodger borrowed my Bible, and soon he was reading the New Testament with understanding and enjoyment.

All the while, he was becoming more cheerful, more hopeful, more relaxed. The strained and frightened look faded from his eyes. He laughed more and took more interest in the company of others.

One day, he suddenly said to me, 'I'm going to look around and see if I can give a hand anywhere. I've been helping the orderlies in the hospital. But I reckon I can do more.'

Eventually Dodger found where he could be of service – in a way that was badly needed. The filthiest job in camp was to collect the used ulcer rags, scrape them clean of pus, boil them, and return them for future use. A smelly, unpleasant job it was, but Dodger volunteered for it. He seemed to get

satisfaction from it. Regularly I would see him going from hut to hut, carrying his noxious can of effluvious rags, and whistling as he walked.

Observing him, I concluded that he had come to terms with life. He knew that he hadn't long to live. What he had to do was to live out the days that remained to him, moment by precious moment.

Dodger turned out to have hidden assets. He had a quick eye and a sharp mind, perhaps unsuspected by himself until he learned to use them in the service of his comrades. He had only to learn of a particular need and he would take on the responsibility of trying to supply it.

A prisoner's mess tin went missing. Dodger devised one by beating two tin cans into something approximating to the desired shape. Or he would provide a container he had carved from a section of bamboo. Someone else couldn't face the rice any more. Dodger would be seen crouched over his tiny fire with his little home-made skillet, cooking up an omelet – out of a duck egg and some lime juice. When grateful prisoners paid him now and then for these small services, he accepted the money under protest. Then he used it to buy food for those in need.

The last time I saw him, his slight figure was moving energetically along, intent on some errand for a comrade. He conveyed the impression of a man happy and fulfilled by having found a purpose.

The new hope and feeling for life among many also found expression in a burst of artistic activity. Many prisoners with initiative had earlier begun to create outlets for personal expression, in workshops, laundries, shoe-making, distilling alcohol, a brickworks and similar things. In these the Australians had taken a lead, since they were rather more used to roughing it than most of the prisoners of other nationalities.

These facilities had done a good deal to ease the lot of a good number of the prisoners. But there was still a need for different kinds of expression, and it was the artistic side of man's personality that flowered chiefly under the impact of the new spirit animating many in the camp.

The POWs could hardly have turned to the arts at a less propitious time in their lives. But under the urge to give meaning to their existence they exhibited remarkable resourcefulness. For those who wanted to try carving, raw materials were at hand; the jungle abounded in all kinds of wood, some of it beautiful in hue and texture. Those who had been able to hang on to their pocket-knives were inspired to shape heads from it.

Sketch-artists and cartoonists salvaged bits of charcoal from the cook-house fires and drew with them on odd pages torn from notebooks or on the soft white inside surface of bamboo trunks. Painters made their own pigments by pounding rocks to powder and emulsifying the powder in machine oil. For brushes they used bits of rag on a stick.

Before long enough creations of various kinds had been accumulated to justify an exhibition at the end of one of the huts. The work of thirty or forty POWs was represented.

On display were carved or sculptured heads; blueprints or pen drawings of sailing-ships; portraits of hut-mates; pictures of wives or girl friends; wry cartoons of prison life. One man did pictures of his children as he imagined they looked. One had been not more than a year old when he left home; the other had just been born. He had not seen them for three years.

The first response of the visitors to the improvised gallery was one of surprise that there should be such talent among us. The next reaction was to wonder if they couldn't do just as well themselves. Thus each wave of artistic expression set off succeeding waves.

Then there was the orchestra.

I was standing outside my hut one day talking to Bill Maclean when he saw a friend of ours, an officer in the Indian Army, heading purposefully towards us.

‘What’s that Jim’s got in his hand?’ said Bill. ‘I can’t believe it! It’s a violin!’

A shipment from the International YMCA with an assortment of games and food parcels, had just reached the camp.

‘There were six fiddles among the games,’ Jim explained. ‘The Nips can’t eat ’em or sell ’em. So they thought if they turned the violins over to us they could report that they’d distributed the parcels. That would make it only two-thirds of a lie, which is a good deal closer to the truth than they usually come.’

Jim looked from Bill to me.

‘Can either of you play one?’

Bill shook his head.

‘How about you, Ernie?’

‘I’ll have a go.’

I tucked the violin under my chin, tested the strings and tightened the keys. I had not played one since I was twelve years old. I could see the room in my home in Scotland – the sunlight on the bright flowered wallpaper, the heavy old fashioned mahogany chairs, the thick green curtains, and my mother seated at the upright walnut piano playing my accompaniment.

Taking the bow in my hand now, I tried to remember the pieces I had once learned in what seemed at the time senseless drudgery. I played a few bars from ‘O Sole Mio’, then from ‘The Blue Danube Waltz’. As I scraped away, I had a feeling that I wasn’t getting the best out of the instrument. I noticed that Bill was gritting his teeth.

Then Jim said, ‘Coo! That’s ruddy awful. The Nips’ll think we’re castrating a tom-cat.’

‘You don’t appreciate good classical music, that’s your trouble,’ I retorted.

‘That was neither good, nor classical, nor music,’ said Jim.

'But why must you find someone who can play the fiddle!' I asked. Jim went on to explain that now the violins had come, there was a plan afoot to form an orchestra. The Japanese had given their permission because they wanted to be entertained.

'Takes more than a few fiddles to make an orchestra,' I reminded him.

'What are you going to do about the other instruments?' Bill put in.

'And not only the instruments,' I said. 'What about scores and all that sort of thing?'

'Norman has everything in hand,' said Jim. 'Do you know Norman?'

'Oh yes, we know him,' Bill replied. 'He's a member of our club in good standing.'

'Club?' Jim looked at us quizzically.

'The Amoebic Dysentery Club. It's quite democratic. The only requirement for membership is a bloody stool.'

With Norman at the helm, we were confident that, whatever the obstacles, the camp would have an orchestra. Norman was what the Diggers called 'a Dingo Kid'. In spite of the fact that the parasites had done their worst to him, he still had remarkable enthusiasm and drive – especially where his first love, music, was concerned.

Music was the passion of his life, and he wanted it to be his profession. But his family expected him to make money instead of music, so he had taken a job with a bank somewhere in the City. In his spare time he had been conductor of a music society in the London neighbourhood where he lived. He also played several instruments himself. Gifted with a photographic memory, he could reproduce the score of many compositions on demand, for any section of an orchestra.

Norman had already pretty well organized the brasses, Jim told us, having flushed a number of trumpets, trombones and especially saxophones from among the possessions of the pris-

oners. The musicians for the woodwind section were already hard at work making their own instruments. I wanted to know how on earth they had obtained the materials.

'Bamboo,' said Jim. 'Bamboo, remember, comes in all sizes.'

'But how do you go about making a woodwind out of bamboo?' Bill asked. 'The whole thing sounds impossible.'

'Far from it. In fact, we're already nearly up to full strength. I'm no woodwind musician myself, but I'll try to tell you how it's done. First you choose a bamboo with the right diameter and cut it down to the length you want. Then you put a plug in one end, leaving room for the reed. Now comes the hard part – you start boring holes with a penknife to get the right notes. So you bore and then you test with a pitch pipe – or tuning whistle, one of which has turned up in camp. You do this until you have just the note you want, d'you see?'

This accounted for strange peeping noises we'd been hearing lately from some of the huts.

'It's quite simple, actually. All you need is patience.'

Jim went on to tell us about some of the other instruments.

'One chap is making his own bass viol,' he said. 'He was able to scrounge a big tea-box. He cut the wood into strips and glued the strips together. Then he had to have the strings; but that bit was easy. He visited the Nip slaughter-house; helped himself to the cows' guts – the Nips didn't mind because they weren't worth anything – took them home and dried them on the fence.'

He waved the violin.

'And these six fiddles are a godsend to the string section. Besides, this chap brought more guts than he can use so now we'll have spare strings for our violins.'

He went on to tell us about the percussion section, which was also assuming promising proportions. The men had made five or six kettle-drums by taking old oil-barrels, hammering them down to different depths and then stretching hides from

the slaughter-house over the tops. The ends of the same barrels made satisfactory cymbals.

'What do they propose to do about scores?' I asked.

'That's kind of screwy,' Jim said. 'They used all the paper scraps they could find.'

The monsoon season was coming on, the time of dispiriting wetness which we dreaded. But this year we were cheered up by the anticipation of our first concert by this motley orchestra. The date was set for early October.

It was an evening to remember. To the north of the camp was a slight rise in the terrain which made a kind of natural amphitheatre and formed the obvious place for the concert. The moment roll-call was over, we rushed to our outdoor concert hall, half a mile away. We found that our Japanese captors had already occupied the front-row seats. But no matter; there was room enough for everybody, and the men quickly took their places on the ground.

The sun had disappeared behind the green bamboo. Overhead the tropic blue of the sky was deepening. Darkness would soon be on us. Norman, wearing fresh khaki shorts and shirt for the occasion, mounted the podium. He raised his baton as a signal to begin, and the heterogeneous collection of instruments launched into their first piece.

I looked down over the slope. The men sat with their hands clasped round their knees, their heads nodding to the rhythm of the music. No orchestra could have asked for a more appreciative audience.

Norman had arranged the programme wisely. He had included music for all tastes, ranging from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony to selections from *The Mikado*. From the abstracted looks on the listeners' faces I could tell that their fancies had taken wing, and were soaring far out beyond the bamboo curtain that held us in. Noble memories, long

dormant, were stirred once again, helping us on the way to fulfilling the infinite possibilities of the spirit.

The night forced itself upon us, and, with the engulfing darkness, too soon, much too soon, the concert was over. At first there was absolute silence, the expectancy of men hoping for more. Then – tumultuous applause. I glanced at my neighbour; his face was shining. ‘Great! Isn’t it great!’ he exclaimed. The cheers and the hand-clapping in thunderous echo were proof that this was the unanimous opinion. Even the guards joined in.

It is impossible to remember now how often after that concerts were held. Once every month? Every two months? Who can say? But they became important markers of time. Whenever there was a performance no one needed to ask, ‘Are you going?’ Everyone was going – if he could limp or crawl or hitch along on his artificial legs – or even if he couldn’t walk at all. It was by no means unusual to see a man being carried up the incline on a stretcher. In music was medicine for the soul.

One night, as the orchestra was playing Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony, I was sitting on the outside of the amphitheatre, not far from the road. A sick party was being marched in from another camp. It must have been a long march, for they looked exhausted. They were bound for the cook-house for a bowl of rice, and were wearily limping past the amphitheatre when the haunting strains of Schubert’s lovely music reached their ears. They turned their heads; they stopped; they sat down. The rice could wait.

While they listened, their faces came to life. When the music had ended, they rose reluctantly, one by one, and moved on. I heard a little skeleton of a man say to his companion with feeling, ‘God, that was lovely – bloody lovely!’

I thought to myself as I heard this, ‘Aren’t there two kinds of food – one for the body and one for the soul? And of the two, surely the latter is the more satisfying?’

The music reminded us that there is always beauty to be found in life – even amid the ashes.

The orchestra remained the most important of the enhancements of life. But now others were beginning to be added. Attempts at concerts had been made early in Chungkai's history, but they had been sporadic and limited affairs that suffered from the lack of any kind of facilities. Now the Japanese granted us permission to build a stage, which made possible a variety of entertainment, from light plays and vaudeville to ballet.

A stage designer named David Ffolke, who has since become well known on both sides of the Atlantic, performed wonders in getting up the sets. He made his paints and dyes from liquid mud or boiled leaves and bark. Rice-sacks and old green Japanese Army mosquito nets did service for backdrops and flats. Perhaps we thought the costumes and décor finer than they really were, for their inspired simplicity gave our imaginations much to feed on.

Fizzer Pearson, a Londoner like Norman, directed all our plays and acted in them. The plots came out of his head. Since we had no script, there was a good deal of 'adlibbing'. Both the writing and the acting may have lacked polish, but the plays were received with the same enthusiasm with which they were produced. A unity rare in the theatre existed between audience and actors. Each understood the other. This understanding bridged the gaps in production and glossed over the rough spots in the dialogue. The plays were mostly the sort of comedies or farces that have long runs in London's West End; but they brought back the tonic sound of men laughing together. This was a welcome contrast to the long months when the sullen silence was never broken except by snarls or complaints.

Two performances in particular made an impression on me. One was the 'Dance of the Scarecrow'. It was presented to us one night, without explanation or introduction. We did not

know who the dancer was, but he must have been a tumbler or an acrobat, a London music-hall performer, perhaps, of considerable gifts.

Dressed as a scarecrow, he tumbled about in time to the music, as though buffeted by the wind. His gymnastic dexterity was earning him unusually loud and prolonged applause. A man in front of me leaned towards his neighbour and said in a low voice, 'Just like life, ain't it?'

The performer was much more than an acrobat – he was an artist. Through the dance of the scarecrow he was giving such an artistic interpretation of man's condition that it brought a strong response from the audience. Sympathetic eyes followed every movement, every expression. They understood the message. The scarecrow's dancing suggested that while he was taking a beating he wasn't going to give up and lie down. He would keep on going, no matter how much it hurt.

I listened again to the conversation in front of me.

'Reminds you of Charlie Chaplin, don't he?'

'Yes, the way he keeps getting knocked down, and then bobbing back like that, as though he's coming up for more.'

'Aye, he does that. He says to you that life *is* a knock-about, but you've got to keep going. It's the keeping going that makes him human, isn't it? Whenever he stops a bit, or lies down – he's just a scarecrow. Ain't that right?'

'Sure it is.'

They watched the dance. Then the second man said, 'Queer, how he's got us all thinking the same thing, ain't it?'

'Yes, it is queer.'

'Why do you s'pose that is?'

'I reckon somewhere along the line he's come to understand that's the way life is. And *we* understand that he understands. Reckon that's it.'

'Yes,' said the second man. 'I reckon it is.'

The other performance that lingers in my memory was also

a dance, although quite different in character. This was the 'Dance of the Lotus Flower'. The dancer was a Dutch Eurasian who had performed with a professional ballet company. He volunteered to do this dance which was his speciality.

As the curtain went up, there was nothing to be seen but the lotus flower itself on the bare stage. To look at it one would never have dreamed that it was made from discarded rice-sacks and stretched on a bamboo frame skilfully painted with homemade vegetable dyes.

The orchestra went into its overture. Slowly the lotus flower opened its petals. A lissom figure dressed from head to toe in black soared out and began to dance. The shadow swept around the stage in a succession of graceful arabesques. My comrades were following with rapt attention, interpreting every movement, each in his own way. By their sheer beauty, the symbolic movements and gestures reached into our minds and hearts to call forth memories and aspirations we had all but forgotten.

Deliciately, the dancer painted for us a picture of hope. 'Yes, life is good,' he seemed to be saying with his body. 'Look at the beauty all around us. See it in the flower of which I am a part, in the sunlight which opens the petals and the breeze which moves me. I dance because I am a part of that beauty and because I am thankful for the mystery that is life.'

He floated back into the lotus flower, and the petals closed about him.

The orchestra faded gently out.

At irregular intervals there was community singing. We passed our requests to the master of ceremonies beforehand. Usually we asked for the songs of childhood. Among the favourites were 'Tipperary', 'Pack Up Your Troubles', 'The Mountains of Mourne', 'The Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomond', 'Mother Machree', 'D'Ye Ken John Peel?' and 'Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree'.

When the singing was at its height the requests would shift to songs of a more inspirational character: 'The Lord is My Shepherd' (sung to the simple tune of 'Crimond'), 'Abide With Me', 'Jerusalem the Golden' and 'Lead Kindly Light'.

The last chords ended, the prisoners, with spirits refreshed, moved back to their huts in a state of peace they had not known for a long time.

The leaven was spreading. We were spiritually armed with faith, hope and love. We had a will to life rather than a will to death. But our weapons could be of little value unless we wielded them daily in the service of others. In that long dark period when many of us had lived by the law of the jungle intent only on our own survival we had ignored the sick. We had regarded them as an offence. The very sight of them was a reproach, reminding us that they had left their share of work to be done by the rest.

Now, although we wanted to help, it was not easy. There were so many sick, and those well enough to care for them were so few. The Japanese had strictly limited the number of orderlies, and so much of the time of these was taken up with removing the dead that the sick had to be left, in great part, to their suffering.

Since most of the illnesses stemmed from vitamin and protein deficiency, one way we could help was to supply the sick with food other than the daily rice and the very occasional tiny quantities of meat, sugar, tea and salt that sometimes found their way into our diet. There was, of course, the canteen. But our pay was so meagre that if we could buy a duck egg or a hand of bananas once a month we were doing well.

To extend our efforts, we took our chances by going outside the fence. On the edge of Thai villages scattered along the river-bank a few limes grew wild as well as the red chillis, a rich source of vitamins. Occasionally there were bananas.

Although to be caught meant death, prisoners undertook expeditions to procure these foods for their sick fellows.

We tried all kinds of experiments. We knew that fermentation produced Vitamin B. So we let masses of rice ferment in water and used the liquid as medicine. The taste, however, was so vile that we couldn't induce our patients to drink it. From a brew of this type we learned to distil alcohol which proved invaluable to the doctors in sterilizing their instruments.

Down by the hospital we started a garden. It was small and inconspicuous, but it meant more to us than an acre of diamonds because to it we transplanted any useful growing thing from the jungle. With the help of two trained botanists, one an Englishman, the other Dutch, we were able to grow a number of plants of medicinal value. Most important was one with strong narcotic properties which was used as a substitute for normal anaesthetics.

The botanists also identified certain leaves, barks and roots growing in the jungle which also had medicinal uses. One of these was a fruit about the size of an apple, evil-tasting, dark brown in colour, but effective in bringing relief from dysentery. Dinty Moore had brought me a supply during the early days when he was nursing me. The effects of the fruit were immediate, curtailing my affliction so that I was able to enjoy a decent night's rest.

The task of our medical officers was a frustrating one. In spite of the limitations, however, they were able to do marvellous work. To practise their vocation they had to draw upon all their resources. Never had the enemy Death been more powerful; never had the tools at their command been so limited. Under the circumstances it was an art, rather than a science, that they practised. Often when a surgeon was faced with a major operation, he first had to make his own instruments, turning ordinary kitchen knives into scalpels. Sutures were made out of dried guts.

The increasing availability of alcohol for sterilizing and of narcotics for anaesthesia heartened the doctors and made them redouble their efforts to help their patients keep their hold on life. More and more men volunteered to give blood transfusions. The less sick gave their blood to the more sick, until the more sick became less sick and were able to give their blood in return.

Of greater importance than giving blood was the encouragement of patients to have faith in God. Faith undoubtedly strengthened their will to live. Without it, men often died from no visible cause. With it, they survived a multiplicity of diseases, any one of which could have proved fatal.

We recovered respect for the dead. When it became apparent that someone's end was near, word would be passed around among his friends. Every effort would be made to see that there was a good turnout. It was not possible to have a set time for funerals; the dead did not keep in that damp jungle heat; and men died at all hours.

A group of friends would gather to form the funeral cortège, wearing either a clean loincloth or a shirt and shorts out of respect. They would march behind the pallbearers carrying the deceased to his last resting-place. Later, when chaplains came to Chungkai, one of them would deliver a brief service. When no chaplain was on hand, an officer would read a passage from the Bible. Every man went to a grave of his own, with a cross to mark it. On the cross a friend would carve the facts of his life; his name, regiment and rank, and the dates of his birth and death.

An orderly method was worked out for disposing of a man's effects. These were distributed among those closest to him in his unit. A new respect for the dead had created a more dignified way of burying them.

We also regained respect for ourselves because human life had value once more. Stealing ceased; mutual confidence grew,

overcoming selfishness and suspicion. It extended to the issuing of our daily rations. We knew that the cooks were doing their best and that the servers were trying to be fair.

The first acts of our recovery had taken place under the worst circumstances, at the very bottom of the abyss. The drive to finish the railway had been unrelenting; the Japanese lash was on our backs; death was everywhere. As we turned to God, we were given strength to face up to our difficulties.

One living example of faith among many was a high-spirited young private from Aberdeen, who had joined our battalion with the last draft; he had entertained us with his inexhaustible supply of jokes about his native city. When I met Jock again here at Chungkai, he was running a Bible-lending library. He had thought it up, and organized it himself. By gift, barter and the fact of death, he had acquired a large stock. His prospective readers were so numerous that he could loan his Bibles out for only an hour at a time. He would then collect them and pass them on to those next on his waiting list.

Jock had heart disease, beriberi, malaria and dysentery, as well as a host of other ailments. The wonder was not so much that he was able to stay on his feet and get about, but that he was still numbered among the living. Through his faith and his humour, both of which were very great, he not only kept himself going, but infused life into others.

A day came when no Bibles were passed around. The patients wanted to know what had become of Jock. Then we learned that he had cholera and had been taken to the isolation area. This was as good as the end. The cholera compound was a place from which very few returned. Jock was mourned by the many to whom he had brought comfort and cheer. The library service was resumed, but there was no substitute for his hearty voice and kindly manner.

Then one day he was back. Although he was so diseased that

there was hardly a healthy piece of flesh on him and so weak that he could not stand, with his unquenchable spirit he had survived. He was bed-ridden now, but the place where he lay became a shrine for men to visit and come away strengthened. Their number was evidence of how much he was beloved.

I stopped to chat with him every morning on my way to work on the railway. He always greeted me with a smile and a kindly word. His concern was for me rather than for himself. It was the same for his comrades, whose stories he knew so well.

One morning when I asked him how he was feeling he answered, 'Oh, I'm nae sae bad, sir. I might be an awful lot worse. There's always something to thank God for. I enjoy life and I've got good friends. And it won't be so long before we'll be goin' home.'

He gave me a big smile as though I was the one who needed encouragement.

When I returned that evening I learned that Jock was dead. He had died less than an hour after I left him. His body had given up the struggle at last. A very gallant spirit had left us.